

# THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE FORUM

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## Revolution in the Soviet Theater

by Alma Law

A revolution is under way in the Soviet theater. There has been nothing like it since the turbulent years following the 1917 October Revolution, when all the arts were pressed into service by the nascent Soviet state. The past three years under Mikhail Gorbachev have seen an unprecedented shift toward a much more flexible approach to the arts, allowing for greater "ideological and moral elasticity." While the dogma of socialist culture has hardly been abandoned, its definition has been considerably broadened to include the kind of rich diversity that characterized the arts in the first decade following the Revolution.<sup>1</sup>

In this age of *glasnost'*, theater's role as an instrument of education and indoctrination is being challenged by new artistic considerations. For the first time in sixty-five years, censorship has been all but abolished. Theaters are enjoying far greater freedom than they could ever have imagined three years ago, when the mere act of putting the bust of Stalin on the stage was enough to cause a sensation. Today, Stalin himself is on the stage of a student theater located just a stone's throw from the Kremlin. Even Lenin is parodied in *We're Looking for Encounters*, a production that just opened at Svetlana Vragova's Theater-Studio on Spartak Square.

In stunned silence, overflow audiences at the "Sovremennik" Theater are watching *The Steep Route*, a production based on *Into the Whirlwind*, Evgeniia Ginzburg's (Vassily Aksyonov's mother) extraordinary memoir about her imprisonment and interrogation in 1937, a work never published in the Soviet Union. Shock of another order awaits the packed auditorium at the Moscow "Satirikon" Theater where Roman Viktiuk has given Jean Genet's *The Maids* an evocatively erotic twist by using an all-male cast.

Productions of Ionesco and Beckett, long banned as manifestations of Western decadence, are now a firmly established part of the theatrical spectrum. Vladimir Nabokov has

also joined the theater repertory, with his *Invitation to a Beheading* currently playing at the Ermolova Theater in Moscow. For the first time, Polish playwrights are turning up in force on playbills, particularly in Moscow — where one can find productions of everything from Slawomir Mrozed's *The Emigrés* and *Tango*, a parable in the form of a family drama of the rise of totalitarianism, to *Cinders*, Janusz Glowacki's picture of life in a girl's reformatory.

Directors have also been busy resurrecting the works of Soviet writers of the 1920s and 30s. With the staging this past season at the Vakhtangov Theater of *Zoya's Apartment*, a tragifarce set in a bordello, virtually all of Bulgakov's plays are back in the theater repertory. Nikolai Erdman's *The Suicide*, banned since it was shown at a closed rehearsal at Meierkhol'd's Theater in 1932, is playing for the first time in its uncut version. The official blackout has also been lifted on the little-known peasant playwright, Aleksandr Kopkov, whose 1932 comedy, *The Elephant*, premiered last year at the Moscow Theater of the Soviet Army. Andrei Platonov is another writer of the 1930s whose works are only now being "discovered." Aleksandr Dzekun, the young chief director of the Saratov Drama Theater took the first step with his staging of *Fourteen Red Huts*, Platonov's bitter denunciation of collectivization. The production, featuring a huge color portrait of Stalin on its stage curtain, proved a shocker when it was shown in Moscow last year. It left both critics and audiences confused as to how to respond and prompted at least one audience member to exclaim, "Out and out slander!" as she left the auditorium at intermission.

At the Malyi Dramatic Theater in Leningrad, *Returned Pages*, directed by Lev Dodin, has brought together in a single production the works of fifteen once-banned writers and poets, including Acmeist poet Nikolai Gumilev, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Joseph Brodsky. Accompanying it is a pro-

1 "Prizvanie sotsialisticheskoi kul'tury," *Kommunist*, 15 (October 1987), pp. 3-14; reprinted in *Sovetskaia kul'tura* (hereafter SK), (October 22, 1987), pp. 4-5.





gram full of documentary information about their lives and fate. The late poet-bard Aleksandr Galich, who was forced into exile in the 1970s, has also been rehabilitated with productions by and about him sprouting up all over Moscow this past year.

## The Changing Aesthetics of Theater

Director Roman Vikiuk complained not long ago, "How can we compete with that most brilliant of theater directors, Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev, and the theater he is creating in our public life?" Whereas in the previous two decades people were drawn to the theater as a source of information and to gain insights into what was happening in their own lives, today this is no longer true. The intelligentsia will still turn out for certain directors (Anatolii Vasil'ev or Robert Sturua, for example) or for certain prose writers or playwrights (Bulgakov or Platonov), but it has largely abandoned its tradition of habitual theater-going. The homogeneous and loyal Taganka or "Sovremennik" following that never missed a single production is currently giving way to the more random audience typical of theaters in the West. Theatergoers tend to pick and choose, weighing what is available against the many possibilities for spending their leisure time.

The kind of muckraking productions and Party plays that dominated playbills in the first year of Gorbachev's reign can still be found in provincial theaters, but they have largely disappeared from the stages of Moscow and Leningrad, as well as the capital cities of the republics. Nudity, vulgar language, suggestive behavior and elegantly extravagant clothing — these are what sell tickets today, particularly in Moscow where there is a growing constituency of new Soviet elite. It is the well-heeled bureaucrats and *nouveaux riches*, or as one Soviet director characterized them, the "haute bourgeoisie" and the "lumpen bourgeoisie," who are setting the tone. Thus the enormous popularity of Edvard Radzinskii's recent plays, *Sporting Scenes*, 1981, loosely based on Galina Brezhneva and her husband, Iurii Churbanov, currently running at the Ermolova Theater, and *I'm Standing by a Restaurant...*, a duel of wits between an actress and her former lover, staged at the Maiakovskii Theater (tickets for it are selling on the street for thirty-five rubles).

Of contemporary Soviet playwrights, Radzinskii and Aleksandr Galin are virtually the only ones whose works are solidly established in current theater repertoires. Galin, whose prolific pen has earned him the title of the Soviet Neil Simon, recently won international notoriety for his play, *Stars in the Morning Sky*, about the prostitutes who were shipped out of Moscow during the 1980 Olympic games. First staged and toured abroad by Lev Dodin and his Maliy Dramatic Theater in Leningrad, it has since entered the repertory of numerous other theaters. Prostitution is also the subject of Radzinskii's latest play currently in rehearsal at the Ermolova Theater. Entitled *Our Decameron*, it features the exploits of a former high-priced prostitute catering to foreign businessmen.

The one thing that is noticeably absent are plays by young playwrights. Most of the so-called new playwrights now being performed on the main stages are not new at all, but rather writers like Liudmila Petrushevskiaia and Liudmila Razumovskaia whose works have been around for many years playing in amateur circles, but who are only now making it into the official theater. Part of the problem is an older generation of directors and actors who are unable to find the key to these playwrights. The production of Petrushevskiaia's *The Moscow Chorus* this past season at the Moscow Art Theater is an example of how badly the traditional Stanislavskian form of realistic theater serves the new dramaturgy. The most successful productions of the new playwrights will probably continue to be in the smaller studio-theaters where a young generation of artists and directors can better capture the mix of stark realism and absurdist fantasy that is so characteristic of the works of playwrights like Nina Sadur, Aleksei Shipenko and Iurii Volkov.

As for the calls appearing with increasing frequency in the official press for plays reflecting the "new reality" of *perestroika*, or restructuring, they are largely going unheeded. The older generation of playwrights, including Aleksandr Gelman, Viktor Rozov, Afanasii Salynskii, even Mikhail Shatrov, seem loath to resume writing social-political dramas, and certainly theaters are not demanding them, now that they are no longer required to include them in their repertoires. To be sure, there are a few adventurous young directors staging documentary-style productions calling into question certain public policies. At his politically-oriented Moscow Theater-Studio "Na doskakh" (on the boards), Sergei Kurginian has put together a fascinating "Liturgy of Facts" about Chernobyl under the title of *Compensation*. Based on interviews of evacuees conducted by the psychologist Adol'f Kharash and other documentary material, it is followed by an often heated discussion session in which invited (and uninvited) specialists join the audience in debating the question of nuclear safety and the public's right to know.

*Glasnost'* is also bringing with it the demythologizing of the great Russian theater director, Konstantin Stanislavskii, and a reassessment of his System, which since the 1930s has served as the single model of actor training and directing for all Soviet theaters. For the first time directors and actors can speak openly of the psychophysical teachings of actor Mikhail Chekhov — who emigrated in 1928 after learning that there was an order out for his arrest — and of the experimental work by foreign theater practitioners like Polish director Jerzy Grotowski. Experimental workshops employing everything from yoga to behavioral science are sprouting everywhere as the younger generation strives to catch up with the latest trends in actor training.

Anatolii Vasil'ev, whom critic Marianna Stroeve has called "our greatest hope," characterizes his new School for Dramatic Art as "theater of play," contrasting it to what he calls the Stalinist "theater of struggle," where everything is directed upward toward a single unambiguous superobjective (the



model being Soviet society itself striving upward toward Communism). Rejecting the model of the cone and its summit, Vasil'ev proposes in its place the cylinder, "along which one can move freely in different directions toward a kind of infinity." In contrast to the theater of struggle, it is the process, rhythm and atmosphere of productions, such as his *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, that are important rather than an unambiguous "social message."

A renewed interest in Aleksandr Tairov's work from the teens and twenties is bringing back more highly refined aesthetic concepts, as evidenced by productions such as Roman Viktiuk's almost balletic staging of Marina Tsvetaeva's *Phaedra*. Other directors, like Iurii Pogreblichko in Moscow and Eimuntas Nekrošius in Vilnius, Lithuania, are introducing a new diversity of performance styles. Their iconoclastic stagings of Chekhov's *The Seagull* (by Pogreblichko at his Theater-Studio on Krasnaia Presnia) and *Uncle Vania* (by Nekrošius at the Vilnius Youth Theater), both highly praised by Western critics, have brought Post-Modernism into the Soviet theater for the first time. Other young directors, among them Boris Iukhananov and Roman Smirnov, are working with poets, musicians and singers from the underground rock and video culture to create a new synthesis of music, poetry and performance in multimedia productions such as Iukhananov's staging of *The Observer*, based on Aleksei Shipenko's play about a group of disaffected rock musicians.

## The Move for Reform

A decree currently going into effect is placing all theaters in the country under a new economic and management system.<sup>2</sup> The reforms outlined in the decree represent the most sweeping changes since the 1930s, when the permanent repertory company was established as the single model for all Soviet theater. And in some respects one would have to go back to before the Revolution to find anything comparable. It marks the culmination of three years of intense struggle, as entrenched bureaucrats both inside and outside the theater fought to cling to their power and privileges.

The reforms are the result of a genuinely grass roots movement by theater practitioners determined, after decades of bureaucratic abuse, to take advantage of the avenues opened up by Gorbachev's campaign to enlist the artistic community in his program of reform and restructuring. Unlike their counterparts in the other arts, the theater world has not been decimated by the mass emigrations that found the best writers and artists abroad when the possibility for change finally became a reality.

It also helped the reformers' cause that Gorbachev, by far the best educated and most sophisticated leader since Lenin, has shown a special interest in theater. In the spring of 1985,

shortly after Gorbachev became General Secretary, the First Couple attended a performance of *Uncle Vania* at the Moscow Art Theater. In the months that followed, Gorbachev and his wife attended performances at other theaters as well. What is more, he began relying on prominent theater people, including Oleg Efremov, head of the Moscow Art Theater, and actor Mikhail Ulianov, to campaign for his sweeping reforms.

Petr Demichev's retirement as Minister of Culture in June 1986 removed a major obstacle to reform. A time-serving bureaucrat whose appointment in 1974 was generally regarded as a demotion, Demichev had played an instrumental role in the forced emigration of a number of prominent Soviet artists, including Yuri Lyubimov, former chief director of the Taganka Theater. Gorbachev's appointment of Vasilii Zakharov as Demichev's replacement was taken as a further sign of support for change. While he had no direct experience with the arts (except as a one-time singer on the amateur stage in Leningrad), Zakharov's background in economics was certainly a cut above that of his predecessors' qualifications, given the change in responsibilities he would be facing.

## The Theater in Crisis

By the time Mikhail Gorbachev took over as General Secretary in 1985, there was virtually universal agreement among directors, playwrights, critics, even representatives of the official cultural apparatus, that the Soviet theater was in a serious state of crisis, the result of over twenty-five years of increased bureaucratization. The ever-growing number of Party and Ministry directives aimed at controlling the theater and its repertory was clearly taking its toll. The mere mechanics of getting approval for a repertory that would meet all the requirements set by the Ministry of Culture (festivals, anniversaries, quotas of Soviet plays), and still offer productions which would please the public, left theater directors with little time and energy to devote to their profession.

The rigid restrictions under which professional theaters operated was significantly eroding that jewel in the Soviet cultural crown, the permanent repertory company of like-minded people. Earlier generations of theater artists often had nowhere to go if they left their home theater, but now television provided an alternate source of income. Actors began asking themselves why they should perform on the stage for a mere pittance when they could earn far more for a day's shooting in a film or TV studio.

Television brought with it all the vices of the star system, and in an attempt to win larger audiences, more and more theaters invited name actors to add to the appeal of their productions. Theaters also found it increasingly convenient to invite outside directors to rehearse potentially controversial plays on the side, lessening the risk of official embarrassment

2 "O perevode teatrov strany na novye usloviia khoziaistvovaniia," approved by the Commission of the USSR Council of Ministers for the perfection of the planning, administrative and economic mechanism, November 22, 1988, protokol No. 136, section III. The details of the reforms were subsequently outlined in a decree enacted by the Collegium of the USSR Ministry of Culture and the Secretariat of the Board of the USSR Union of Theater Workers, No. 25, dated March 16, 1989. See draft published in *SK* (October 7, 1988), p. 10; *SK* (November 26, 1988), p. 9.



and financial risk. These factors led to a growing migration of theater artists from one theater to another, resulting in a further decline in the quality of productions.

By the mid-eighties, many actors and directors were turning to amateur stages, where they could work in an atmosphere free of the smothering restrictions imposed on the established theater. With mounting competition from other forms of entertainment, theater attendance nose-dived. It was still possible to fill the most popular houses in Moscow every night, thanks largely to the hordes of visitors coming to the capital every day, but it became more and more difficult to attract the public to the approximately 600 other professional theaters throughout the Soviet Union. Provincial theaters, caught in a feverish round of staging as many as fifteen productions a season in order to bring in audiences, began pandering to the tastes of a mass public, and even papering their houses with Gogol's "dead souls," to meet the attendance requirements set by the Ministry of Culture.<sup>3</sup>

## The Campaign for Reform

It was Mark Zakharov, head of the prestigious Lenin Komsomol Theater in Moscow, who fired the opening shot in the battle for theater reform. In a July 1985 article entitled, "Applause Cannot Be Shared," he asked, "Who will carry out the necessary restructuring of the theater's economic position? Are we going to wait for detailed and carefully elaborated paragraphs and subparagraphs...or are we ourselves going to undertake active efforts directed at intensifying our work?" Zakharov went on to argue for "fundamentally new methods of theater organization" which would take into account recent technological innovations and economic practices.<sup>4</sup>

Other prominent theater personalities quickly responded to Zakharov's call to action. In an incisive analysis of the crisis in the theater, Georgii Tovstonogov, head of the Leningrad Bolshoi Dramatic Theater, wrote of the stifling effect of the growing number of regulations aimed at limiting the theater's freedom in terms of finances, repertory and artistic cadres. He also took up the cause of young playwrights whose plays are consistently rejected by incompetent bureaucrats, "virtuosos at playing it safe." Tovstonogov went on to challenge the requirement that a production be submitted to party and cultural officials for approval before it could be shown to the public. Finally, he raised the question of finding a mechanism for creating new professional theaters, certainly one of the most serious problems confronting the theater community. "There should be dozens, perhaps even hundreds of studios for young

professional actors," Tovstonogov argued, pointing out that established theaters need the challenge of young rivals.<sup>5</sup>

Andrei Goncharov, chief director of the Maiakovskii Theater in Moscow, complained that in order to win permission to stage a new play he had to knock at dozens of doors. He also raised the question that has long vexed theater directors: "Who actually runs the theater?" Although the Soviet theater is generally regarded as a "director's theater," in actual fact, since the mid-1960s, power has been divided between a chief director (*rezhisser*) responsible for artistic matters, and a managing director (*direktor*), who controls the theater's finances and the hiring and firing of actors. "The result," Goncharov noted, "is a two-headed organism in which, as a rule, the pragmatic, financial head prevails at the expense of artistic merit." Goncharov went on to call for a single artistic head answerable for every aspect — financial and artistic — of running the theater.<sup>6</sup>

The first move toward reform came on March 1, 1986, when the Communist Party Central Committee issued a decree setting guidelines for election every five years, beginning that year, of the theater's artistic staff (directors, actors, etc.).<sup>7</sup> By the end of May, of the country's 630 theaters, 437 had already held the first round of elections.<sup>8</sup> But even as the decree was going into effect, many questioned the wisdom of this ostensible move to democratize the theater. Playwright Viktor Rozov, one of its most outspoken critics, labeled the notion that artistic matters could be determined by majority rule as "naive and downright ridiculous."<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, Rozov's words would prove all too correct.

In another move, the RSFSR Ministry of Culture introduced a flexible system of pricing theater tickets to take effect September 1, 1986.<sup>10</sup> Again, it was Mark Zakharov who spoke up, expressing regret that the new system offered complicated rules, leaving theaters with little discretionary choice. He asked, "Aren't the new instructions saying: be bold, independent and responsible artists, but only by thirty percent!"<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the dramatic theaters wasted no time in agonizing over the Ministry's complex pricing formulas. Instead, much to the anger of theatergoers, who regard cheap theater tickets as one of their basic rights, they raised top ticket prices almost across the board to three rubles, an increase in many instances of fifty percent.

These token reforms were hardly enough to satisfy the growing chorus of voices bemoaning the calamitous state of the Soviet theater. In fact, many saw them as just another version of previous reforms imposed from above, none of which had led to any significant change.

3 For a more detailed examination of the crisis in the theater, see my Occasional Paper, No. 195, "Soviet Theater in Transition: The Politics of Theater in the 1980s," Washington, D.C.: Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, 1984.

4 *Literaturnaia Gazeta* (hereafter LG), (July 31, 1985), p. 3.

5 LG (December 25, 1985), p. 8.

6 SK (January 16, 1986), p. 5.

7 No. 282: "O poriadke formirovaniia tvorcheskikh sostavov teatrov, konsernykh organizatsii i khudozhestvennykh kollektivov."

8 E. Zaitsev, "Obnovlenie teatra," *Teatr* (December 1986), pp. 46-53.

9 LG (February 12, 1986), p. 12.

10 V. Shcherban', "Pochem bilety v teatr," *Izvestiia* (June 11, 1986), p. 6.

11 *Izvestiia* (June 11, 1986).



## The Union of Theater Workers

As it turned out, the campaign for reform launched in the press was only a prelude to the revolt that took place in October 1986 at the Fifteenth Congress of the All-Russia Theater Society (VTO). The assault was led by Oleg Efremov, who, in speaking to the delegates on October 28, presented a detailed proposal to replace the RSFSR VTO, a voluntary organization formed more than a century before, by a new RSFSR Union of Theater Workers. In the words of critic Aleksandr Svobodin, Efremov's surprise move left the conservative leadership of VTO "stunned, thrown into disarray and at a loss as to what to do about the prearranged agenda."<sup>12</sup> However, the majority of delegates enthusiastically supported Efremov, and a resolution was passed designating the Fifteenth VTO Congress as the First Congress of a new RSFSR Union of Theater Workers.

A resolution adopted by the new Union further challenged the Ministry of Culture by calling for the formation of a USSR Union of Theater Workers to replace the loose confederation of republic theater societies. In an apparent effort to head off such a move, the Ministry published its own draft statute for a USSR Union of Theater Societies.<sup>13</sup> The theater community immediately reacted with an accusation of sabotage. In an open letter entitled "What Sort of Union?" nine prominent activists — including the new head of the RSFSR Union, Mikhail Ulianov, playwright Mikhail Shatrov and directors Georgii Tovstonogov, Oleg Efremov, and Mark Zakharov — charged that the Ministry of Culture was again acting on its own without consulting the theater community.<sup>14</sup>

In a show of support for the reformers, Gorbachev invited a number of prominent theater personalities to the Kremlin on December 3 to discuss the creation of the Union. In speaking to the group, Gorbachev again appealed to the artistic intelligentsia for support "in the struggle for moral rejuvenation and the achievement of a qualitatively new social condition." At the same time he spoke of the process of reform in the theater and of the need for "fresh thinking" in finding ways for the new artistic union to work in cooperation with the state organs of culture.<sup>15</sup>

When the founding Congress of the USSR Union of Theater Societies met two days later, members turned down the proposed Union of Theater Societies in favor of a USSR Union of Theater Workers with Kirill Lavrov as chairman and Oleg Efremov as first secretary. The primary concern of the new leadership was to avoid repeating the mistakes of the older artistic unions (writers, musicians, artists), which were too

easily co-opted by conservative bureaucrats. Emphasis was placed on openness in the conduct of the Unions's affairs. Also, the chairman and secretary of the Union were both limited to two terms of office. And in an effort to thwart the frequent abuses by local officials imposing their own artistic and moral standards, the Union was empowered to block the implementation of unfounded or incompetent administrative decisions relating to theatrical matters.<sup>16</sup>

The new All-Union and Republic Unions gave people working in the theater a formal legal apparatus to represent their interests for the first time. In all, it was a remarkable victory over the conservative forces of chief Party ideologist and Politburo member Egor Ligachev, whose pronouncements on theater consistently reflected a much tougher ideological line than that of his boss.<sup>17</sup>

## Reform in Action

In a parallel move, the USSR Ministry of Culture launched a two-year "Experiment" in theater reform to begin on January 1, 1987.<sup>18</sup> The eighty-two participating theaters in nine republics were given greater freedom to work out their own repertory plans and stage new productions. The number of planning indicators required by the organs of culture was also reduced from eleven to three: number of spectators, salary fund, and amount of state subsidy.

Although other efforts to reform the theater system have been attempted in the past with little success, this time the theater community, after years of frustrating helplessness at the hands of bureaucrats, was ready to act. And act it did, setting in motion waves of chaos which over the next two years threatened to engulf the theater world.

Oleg Efremov immediately moved to cut the size of the Moscow Art Theater troupe, something he had been trying to do ever since he took over the ailing company in 1970. It took more than five months of bitter conflict between various factions before an agreement was finally reached allowing Efremov to divide the 160-member company in two, with half remaining at the original Moscow Art Theater (MKhAT) under his direction, and the other half making its home at the MKhAT Filial on Moskvín Street, headed by actress Tat'iana Doronina.<sup>19</sup>

This acrimonious fight, and an equally bloody confrontation that dragged on for eighteen months at the Vakhtangov Theater, were only the first of many battles that soon erupted in theaters throughout the country as actors and artistic coun-

<sup>12</sup> *Nedelia*, No. 46 (1986), pp. 8-9.

<sup>13</sup> *SK* (November 4, 1986), p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> *SK* (November 22, 1986), p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> *SK* "Vstrecha v TsK KPSS," (December 6, 1986), p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> *SK* (March 31, 1987), p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> E. K. Ligachev, "Nam nuzhna polnaia pravda," *Teatr* (August 1986), pp. 2-7. As the result of the Kremlin shake-up on September 30, 1988, Ligachev's influence on ideology has been considerably diminished. *The New York Times* (October 1, 1988), pp. 1, 5.

<sup>18</sup> No. 330: "O kompleksnom eksperimente po sovershenstvovaniiu upravleniia i povysheniuiu effektivnosti deiatel'nosti teatrov," dated August 6, 1986. *Pravda* (June 22, 1986), p. 3; *SK* (October 16, 1986), p. 2; *Teatral'naia Zhizn'* (hereafter *TZh*), No. 4 (1987), pp. 1, 28-29; Vitalii Dmitrievskii, "Eshche raz pro liubov", ili Eksperiment na seredine distantsii, *Teatr* (April 1988), p. 98.

<sup>19</sup> Andrei Karaulov, "Moment istiny?" *Ogonek*, No. 2 (January 1987), pp. 4-5; *SK* (April 21, 1987), p. 8.



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cils exercised their newly-won rights. The theater unions found themselves overwhelmed by calls from actors and directors to intervene, and before long they were sending commissions all over the country to arbitrate conflicts. According to critic Aleksandr Minkin, "actors in 140 theaters went on the warpath against their chief directors, demanding their dismissal."<sup>20</sup> While in some instances incompetent chief directors were deservedly removed, too frequently members of artistic councils used their new vote to settle old scores, forcing the resignation of talented directors such as Boris Morozov at the Moscow Pushkin Theater.

It was not long before the theater unions also ran into resistance from bureaucrats above (in the Ministry of Culture; Goskontsert, the agency for foreign tours; and Roskontsert, the agency for internal tours) and below (local organs of culture). Even the Minister of Culture complained of certain agreements between the Unions and the organs of culture simply disappearing, "as if someone 'up there' were removing them."<sup>21</sup> Clearly it would take awhile before Ministry personnel would accept the idea of working "together and on an equal footing," a principle that their boss, Vasilii Zakharov, would be called upon to publicly affirm more than once.<sup>22</sup>

As for local cultural agencies (those under regional and city party committees), the Unions found themselves confronted with the same kind of hidden resistance that VTO had formerly faced. Without direct intervention from the central directorate of the Unions — and frequently even that was not sufficient — those theaters eager to respond to the reforms all too often found themselves defenseless.

One of the most significant victories for the reform movement came with the introduction of several programs for creating new theaters. In an innovative resolution passed by the Moscow city council executive committee, a new form of "theater-studio under collective contract" was established on a two-year experimental basis beginning January 1, 1987.<sup>23</sup> The program initially included four already functioning theater-studios headed by Mark Rozovskii, Mikhail Shchepenko, Viacheslav Spesivtsev and Sergei Kurginian, with many more joining since then. These full-time collectives receive no state subsidies. They are organized like work brigades and must earn all their own income. After paying basic salaries (according to minimum pay scales set for all actors and directors) and a token five percent state tax, they have the right to spend their remaining profits as they see fit: on sets and costumes, new equipment, or on a larger payroll. The theater-studios also set their own repertory and performance schedules, including tours to other cities.

The same Mossoviet resolution also created a central umbrella called EKHO (Experimental Self-financing Organization) to represent the interests of the theater-studios. In addition, EKHO was empowered to create additional theater-studios by concluding a contract with any new group of actors, professional or amateur, which had proved its artistic and economic viability.

In another ground-breaking move, in 1987 an Agency for Amateur Theater-Studios was formed in Moscow under joint-sponsorship of the RSFSR Union of Theater Workers, the RSFSR Union of Writers and the MKhAT School-Studio. Whereas the theaters under EKHO were a purely commercial undertaking — you work, you make money; you don't work, you go bankrupt — those under the Agency were provided with a safety net. They were self-financed and subsidized.<sup>24</sup>

The supplement on theater-studios included in the decree recently enacted by the USSR Ministry of Culture and the USSR Union of Theater Workers offers by far the broadest and most flexible program yet proposed for creating new theaters.<sup>25</sup> Based on the principle of decentralization, it enables amateur groups (here defined as any mix of amateur and professional actors) directly to sign a contract for a certain period with any type of organization (factory, museum, house of culture, etc.). The sponsoring organization provides these independents with a performing space and the financial means to outfit it. In contrast to the traditional amateur theaters, these collectives can charge for their performances, using what they earn to pay their own salaries.

This program is expected to provide a natural mechanism for the liquidation of unsuccessful groups (through failure on either side to renew the contract) while opening the door for the successful ones ultimately to win professional status. Dozens of new theater-studios have sprung up in the past year, so many, in fact, that it is virtually impossible to keep track of them. According to the chief economist of the USSR Union of Theater Workers, Aleksandr Rubinshtein, there are already four hundred in Moscow alone, and another one thousand throughout the Soviet Union.<sup>26</sup> Could there be any better testimony to the continuing vitality of Soviet theater?

## A New Round of Reforms

The managerial and economic reforms currently going into effect go far beyond the terms of the Ministry of Culture's two-year Experiment and give theaters unprecedented organizational and financial freedom.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps the greatest achievement is the replacement of the single organizational

20 *Moscow News*, No. 46 (1987).

21 "Eksperiment v zerkale stsiny," *Pravda* (January 16, 1988), p. 3.

22 TASS, (January 15, 1988); *Izvestiia* (January 26, 1988), p. 3.

23 Resolution No. 2699, November 10, 1986. "Teatry-studii: putevka v zhizn'," *SK* (January 22, 1987), p. 3; Interview, Viacheslav Mal'tsev, Moscow, October 14, 1987.

24 Mal'tsev interview.

25 Supplement No. 4 to the decree enacted by the Collegium of the USSR Ministry of Culture and the Secretariat of the Board of the USSR Union of Theater Workers, No. 25, dated March 16, 1989, *op. cit.*

26 Interview, Aleksandr Rubinshtein, Moscow, November 17, 1987.

27 Decree enacted by the Collegium of the USSR Ministry of Culture and the Secretariat of the Board of the USSR Union of Theater Workers, No. 25, dated March 16, 1989, *op. cit.*



model for all theaters by a flexible system based on the principle of diversity. This includes both flexibility in the way professional theaters can come into being, as well as in the way they are organized and administered.

The new decree greatly simplifies the mechanics for opening fully subsidized professional theaters. Formerly it took almost superhuman effort to get permission to open even the smallest professional theater in the most remote region. For Svetlana Vragova to win professional status for her Theater-Studio on Spartak Square in Moscow, her managing director had to spend two years "going through all the circles of hell" in order to get the necessary fifty-seven signatures of bureaucrats at various levels. That system has now been decentralized so that even a local soviet can open a theater.

Under the old system, the managing director was in charge of the theater, and the artistic council was largely under his control. Now different forms of leadership will be possible: artistic head, artistic council, managing director. Furthermore, the role of the managing director is radically changed. Whereas previously the position was a party appointment whose activities were based on carrying out orders and winning approval from above, now the managing director's responsibility is to the collective itself. New programs and seminars are already being set up to teach management principles and to train a younger generation of what are currently called *menedzhery*, from the English word, "managers," how to run the business end of a theater.

The administrative-command system, under which the opportunities for personal patronage using government funds had led to gross inequities in subsidies, has now been abolished. Formerly, a theater never knew what it would receive in any given year since it was all decided subjectively. This will be replaced by a system of normative subsidies yet to be worked out, where the amount is not dependent on some bureaucrat, but is based on economic norms planned over a number of years.

Theaters will have the option of setting top ticket prices without limit. (The Moscow Lenin Komsomol Theater has already raised its top ticket price to five rubles.) The reforms also remove the ceilings on salaries and bonuses as well as the absurd system of pay categories limiting the number of actors at each salary level. All repertory and scheduling plans have been done away with, along with the staggering number of guidelines that theaters had to take into account in working them out. The monopoly on external trade, which held theaters hostage to the Ministry of Culture and Goskontsert, has also been abolished. Since the first of January any theater is free to negotiate directly with a foreign agency or theater regarding a tour, for instance, or an exchange of directors. Furthermore, whatever hard currency the theater earns it can keep.

## The Future of Reform

Aleksandr Rubinshtein recently exclaimed in disbelief, "Three years ago I was an armchair strategist, and now! I would never have dreamed that things would change so radically!"<sup>28</sup> But as he also acknowledges, these reforms leave untouched a myriad of problems connected with the permanent repertory company system. For example, there is still no mechanism for closing already-established theaters, many of which should never have been opened in the first place.

It is still almost impossible for a director to weed out unwanted actors. While everyone agrees on the need to introduce a flexible contract system for artistic personnel, implementation must await the resolution of the much broader question of social guarantees: pensions, financial compensation for unemployed actors, and housing. The Union of Theater Workers has itself made the first move by insuring through supplementary payments that all of its members will receive on retirement a pension equal to one hundred percent of their former salary. But the far more complicated problems of housing and programs for placing and retraining unemployed actors will probably take years to resolve.

And so, in spite of the extraordinary progress already made, the battle is far from over. As Rubinshtein admits, "I am experienced enough to know that there is still no guarantee that [the reforms] won't be reversed."<sup>29</sup> A good deal also depends on continuing support from above, as well as on how the role of the Ministry of Culture is redefined to take into account the reforms. Will it be satisfied to serve in a mere advisory capacity? Or will it once again gradually reassert its control as it did during the Brezhnev years? It has already kept one foot in the door by including in the new decree a provision for commissioning productions "dedicated to facilitating the elevation of the ideational-artistic level of the repertory, and to stimulate the artistic seekings of theatrical collectives."<sup>30</sup>

Undoubtedly much hangs on the way theaters use their newly-won artistic and economic freedom, and the public response to that freedom. One already hears a good deal of grumbling about the number of theaters touring abroad, thereby neglecting audiences at home. And this year an unprecedented number of directors are also staging productions abroad. Something will have to be done to encourage domestic tours, now that the Ministry of Culture can no longer order theaters to make them. (Sending a theater on tour to some remote region was once a favorite form of punishment.)

The public is not happy with the new mood of commercialization; it does not like the idea of paying premium prices for popular productions, or having to pay at all to see amateur and studio productions that were once free. Critics, too, are confused and dissatisfied. Accustomed to treating theatrical productions from a literary and social point of view, they find

<sup>28</sup> Interview, March 10, 1989.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Supplement No. 3 to the decree enacted by the Collegium of the USSR Ministry of Culture and the Secretariat of the Board of the USSR Union of Theater Workers, No. 25, dated March 16, 1989, *op. cit.*



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themselves uncertain as to how to respond to the new aesthetics of Post-Modernist performance. In fact, among more conservative critics, the term "aesthetic" has already taken on the same kind of pejorative connotation that "formalism" did in the 1930s when it served as the code word for "avant-garde experimentation." The blatantly commercial values of a production such as Mark Zakharov's staging this season of Aleksandr Ostrovskii's nineteenth-century classic *The Wiseman* leaves critics at a loss whether to damn or praise the production's spirit of hooliganism, which all but swallows up the text. How, in fact, is one to respond to the crazy antics of the hero, Glumov, who removes his clothes at every opportunity and who courts the boss's wife in his underwear?

Subsidies pose another question awaiting resolution. Clearly the government would like to reduce them, and studies are under way to find other means of supporting theaters. It has already become clear that the feasibility of wholly self-supported theater is limited. Anatolii Vasil'ev has come right out and stated that he cannot work without full subsidization. Even enthusiastic proponents of self-supported theater like Mark Rozovskii (head of the Theater-Studio at Nikita Gates) now admit that it requires an exhausting performance schedule just to stay afloat, leaving little time and energy to create new productions. For the moment, however, the professional theaters have the best of both worlds. Their subsidies, averaging about seventy percent, are still intact; at the same time, they are enjoying unprecedented artistic freedom to explore all forms of theatrical performance as well as the luxury to spend months, even years on staging a single production.

The Minister of Culture continues to be forthright in supporting the principle of pluralism in the arts, saying that

there is no trend that is not entitled to exist.<sup>31</sup> It is still not clear, however, how far that definition of diversity will be allowed to go, given the theater's historic role as a forum for examining social ideas rather than providing entertainment. And is the general public ready for it? Certain productions have already aroused public dissatisfaction. Kama Ginkas' staging of Dostoevskii's *Notes from the Underground* at the Moscow Theater of the Young Spectator, has come under heavy attack. "Isn't it enough that Liza [Dostoevskii's prostitute heroine] is fully nude?" a cultural official asked Ginkas. "Must you really have to have her squat over a basin of water to wash herself? And in front of an audience of young people?"<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, this is putting to the test the limits of public tolerance. The question now is, as critic Anatolii Smelianskii put it, "Will that public dissatisfaction express itself in the old forms: demands for closing and for banning a production, or will we laugh at all that and become a more civilized society with regard to art?"<sup>33</sup>

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31 "Vospitanie krasotoi," *Klub i khudozhestvennaia samodeiatel'nost'*, No. 22 (1988), pp. 1-4, 25.

32 Interview, Kama Ginkas, Moscow, March 9, 1989.

33 Interview, Anatolii Smelianskii, Moscow, March 7, 1989.